Ask Jerry

Well-known teacher and player Jerry Helms answers your bridge questions. Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

Dear Jerry: *My right-hand opponent opened 1♥ and I held this balanced 13-point hand. I decided to double to get into the auction. Partner responded 1♠, my short suit, so I rebid 1NT; I had hearts stopped. The next thing I knew, partner had jumped to 3NT with 7 points, thinking I held a much stronger hand. Why would I need a strong hand to rebid 1NT? If I had opened 1♣ and partner responded 1♠, wouldn't 1NT show about 12–14 points?*

♠ Q 5
♥ A Q 7 3
♦ Q 9 2
♣ K 10 7 4

—P. W., Harrisburg, PA

Dear P.W.: An important lesson in competitive bidding is the following. If right-hand opponent opens the bidding and you choose to pass, it's because your hand falls into one of two categories:

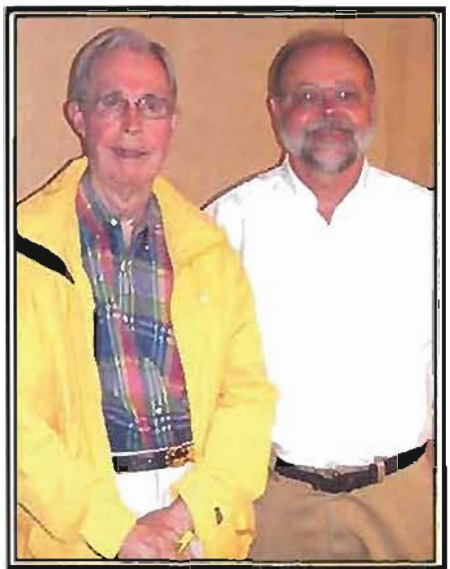
1) You have nothing to say...or
2) There's nothing you can say that describes your hand.

There's a big difference between these two possibilities.

It's true that if you were the dealer with the hand you held, you would have a clear obligation to open the bidding. A pass would deny the values for an opening bid. And if partner responded 1♠, you would rebid 1NT to show a minimum balanced hand.

When right-hand opponent opens 1♥, however, you have an equally clear obligation to pass. Your hand falls into category 2), above. There's nothing you can bid that describes your hand.

The double has a long history. In the early 1900s, a double merely suggested that you wanted to penalize the opponent's last bid. In the 1920s and 30s, the double began to be used to announce that you had values and wanted to compete. In the late 30s, it became the standard takeout double that we still use today.



In memory of Stan Hudmon 1930-2010
Stan Hudmon and Jerry Helms at the Atlantic/Ocala sectional tournament.

A double of right-hand opponent's opening suit bid shows the values for an opening bid or more and three-card or longer support for the unbid suits. The exception is when you have a hand too strong for a simple overcall, about 18 or more points. You can start with a double, planning to bid again to show the extra values.

With only a doubleton spade, the hand you held doesn't qualify for a takeout double of 1♥. It also doesn't qualify for an overcall, since that tends to show a five-card or longer suit. So pass is the best call. You may be able to enter the auction later.

Unfortunately, if you do double, partner will most likely bid spades, which you don't want as trumps. If you now correct this by bidding 1NT, it shows a hand too strong to overcall 1NT, not a hand too weak to open 1NT.

Over 1♥, you could overcall 1NT to show a balanced hand of about 15-18 points with stoppers in hearts.

If you first double and then bid 1NT, you are promising about 19–20 points, a hand like this.

♠ A Q
♥ A K J
♦ K 9 7 2
♣ K 10 7 4

I would start with a double with this hand. Partner will assume that I have a standard takeout double with support for the unbid suits and likely choose one of them. But I have a plan! After hearing from partner, I'm going to rebid notrump to describe my shape and values. Partner won't know I have this type of hand until my rebid.

If partner bids 1♠, I don't have to jump to 2NT with this hand — perhaps getting too high if partner has nothing. My 1NT rebid shows 19-20 points with a heart stopper.

After I double and bid 1NT, partner will know I have a very strong hand. Partner should take us to game with a hand like this, only 6 high-card points. *—JH*

♠ K 9 6 3
♥ 7 4
♦ 10 8 5
♣ Q J 6 2